JACK'S GREAT PERIL.

I never saw such a change in a man in my life! When we last met, Jack—well I must not give his real name, considering what I am going to relate, so I'll call him Jack Pallant—was, as he had ever been since I knew him, one of the lightest-hearted, cheeriest fellows in the world, full of fun and up to every thing, and as gentle and tender as a woman, with the courage of a lion, and now what did I find him? Even though but three months had elapsed, he had become a grave, dejected, saddened man—in a word, hardly recognizable, either mentally or physically. I was shocked, and of course, he saw I was. He came to see me, indeed, the moment he heard I was in town, that I might learn from his own mouth what had happened, instead of at second hand.

Jack had always been more or less a spoiled boy—only sons are more or less spoiled—and having lost his mother when quite a child, it was no wonder that his poor old dad made much of him. But he had taken the spoiling kindly, and beyond making him perhaps a little idle and thoughtless, it had done him no harm. There was no harm in the fellow; he spent more money than he should, but many young soldiers do that without coming to much grief in the long run, and his father, a soldier before him, regarded the failing leniently, paid his bills and looked pleasant. Beyond adding that he was a rather short, dapper little fellow, I need not say much more about him. I have only to try and put into coherent shape the strange and tragical business which had so fearfully altered him.

He was coming to town one autumn evening for a few days' leave from Gunnersholt, where he was quartered. I can see him as plainly as if I had been there, springing into the first carriage that offered room, without the slightest particle of "hawhaw" pride and nonsense, or that stand-offishness of manner, too usual with men in position; ready to make himself happy wherever he was, or in whatever company.

But it so happened, it appears, on this occasion that he got into an empty carriage; at least he thought so, for it was twilight, and he did not observe for the first moment the figure of a woman seated in the further corner, dressed in dark clothes, and thickly veiled.

The sudden discovery that he was not alone rather startled him for a moment, and it may be, as he said, that the evening before having been a guest night at mess, his nerves were not quite up to their usual tone. He was not the lad, however, to be long in such a situation without making some remark to his fellow traveler, though in this case an unusual hesitation to do so came over him, owing to her mysterious appearance and extreme stillness. The between lights of the carriage lamp and the evening sky prevented him from discerning details; but there she sat, perfectly rigid, and with not a vestige of her face visible through the thick, black veil.

"Ahem! ahem!" he said at last, shifting one seat nearer to her and nearly opposite; "I hope I have not intruded on you; I thought the carriage was empty. I may be disturbing you, I fear." He would say anything in a random sort of way to break the ice as he called it.

No answer. A long pause. "Very singular," he thought; and he moved to a seat exactly opposite the figure, making another commonplace observation. No response or any movement.

"Asleep, I suppose," he said to himself; and he sat quietly watching her, while the train rattled on for a mile or two. A station was reached and a stoppage made, with the usual accompaniments of screech and whistling and slamming of doors, but without producing any change in the posture of the occupant of the opposite corner. The train again moved on. "Can't be asleep," he muttered.

"What's the matter with her?"

The window was shut close; he let it down with a tremenduous clatter and bang, remarking that "he hoped as the evening was fine, and the weather warm and the carriage close (for he declared to me there was a peculiar odor hanging about which struck him from the first), she would ot object to a little air."

Still no reply. Then he said she he "feared she was not well. Would she like to have him pull the bell for the guard and have the train stopped again?" But nothing he could do or say elicited any sign of life from her.

Jack now became seriously uncomfortable and alarmed on her account. He thought she could not be asleep, but had fainted. Suddenly it crossed his mind that she was dead. Night had now closed in, but as the last tinge of twilight faded from the sky the carriage lamp gained its full power, and revealed every object more plainly than hitherto.

Jack leaned toward the motionless form. A long black vail, failing from a close fitting hat like bonnet, enveloped nearly the whole upper part of her figure; indeed, on close inspection it hardly looked like an ordinary veil, but more like a large, thin black silk handkerchief. Her dress was of common black stuff, much worn and frayed, from amid the folds of which appeared the ends of a piece of rope that must have been fastened round her waist; and one hand encased in an old, ill fitting black glove, lay placidly on her lap.

Full of uncomfortable sensations, Jack was about to lift the veil, when for the first time, the figure moved; its hand stole slowly from underneath the folds of the dress, and the veil was gradually lifted and thrown up over her head.

Involuntarily my friend shrunk back into the corner of his seat, for a face was revealed to him which no one could have looked on without a sense of awe. It was that of a woman somewhat past middle age, thin, haggard, and pale to a degree which only death could parallel.

The features, finely chiseled and proportioned, showed that at one time there must have been supreme beauty, while, though the iron gray hair looked a little disheveled and unkempt, the glance of the eye was steady, calm and determined.

In this glance lay, chiefly, the awe inspiring expression of the face, for in addition to the penetrating look, there was a persistency in it and at the same time a fascination quite terrible. It fixed itself upon Jack from the first moment that eye met eye, and for several minutes not a word was spoken on either side. Presently, however, he tried to pull himself together, and resume his usual light hearted manner, which had thus for a moment been so strangely and unusually disturbed, and he said briskly:

"I beg your pardon, madam; I was afraid you were ill."

She slightly bent head, but spoke not a word, nor withdrew her glance.

He felt more and more that it was costing him an effort to be himself. Her slow, stealthy, albiet ladylike demeanor, added greatly to the effect already produced, and a curious sensation was gradually creeping over him that—impossible as it might seem—the face was not strange to him, Little as he, with his temperament, was given to speculation or introspection, he found himself striving to look back for some event or circumstance in his life which might give him a clew. Had he ever dreamed of such a face, or had he seen it in childhood? He was puzzled, affected, quite put out. And still the deep, penetrating eyes were fixed on his, piercing, as it were, into his very soul. And still the hands! what were they doing? Taking off the gloves as with a set, deliberate purpose, and the long, which, thin, almost clawlike fingers worked strangely and nervously, slowly closing and opening upon the palm, as if preparing to grasp something:

Again he strove to throw off the unpleasant unusual sensation which had crept over him.

"I can't stand this," he thought, "I was never so uncomfortable in all my life. I must do something, or say something to put a stop to this, to make her take her eyes off me!"

He moved abruptly to the further corner of the carriage, and to the same side on which the woman sat.

"I'll try and dodge her in that way," he said to himself, "she shall not sit and glare at me in this fashion!"

But she too immediately shifted her place, and rising to her full height, which was very great, went over to the seat exactly opposite him, never for one single second dropping her eyes from his. He looked out of the window with a vague notion of getting out of the carriage, when suddenly passing a little station which he recognized, but at which the train did not stop, an idea struck him—an idea after his own heart—a comic idea! He availed himself of it on the instant, and assuming an ease which doubtless sat ill upon him, and which he was far from feeling, he pointed with his thumb back toward the station they had just passed, as he said mysteriously in a hollow voice.

"Do you know that place?"

She seemed to answer in the affirmative by a slight inclination of the head as before.

"Ah! you. Good! Longmoor," he went on; "then I don't mind telling you a secret." He paused. ("I'll frighten her," he thought.) "Criminal lunatics," he said aloud; "I am one of them. I have just escaped from there!"

He leaned forward as if to impress her with his words; she also bent forward until her lips almost touched his ear, as she hissed into it.

"So have I!"

With what had already gone before, this put the finishing touch on Jack's uneasiness of mind. It was not, as he said, the mere presence of the woman, or the revelation which his joke had elicited, which scared him, though the circumstance in itself might be unpleasant enough.

I should have faced it right away from the first as any man would have done, had it not been for the remarkable influence her face and look had upon me. An accountable feeling that she was no stranger to me, it was, that unnerved and even appalled me.

No sooner had she uttered the words, "So have I," than Jack sprang to the cord communicating with the guard's van, for he felt their truth, and saw in them a key to the whole mystery. But ere his hand had reached the cord she had seized him round the waist with one arm as with the grip of a vise, and at the same instant he felt one of those terrible hands at his throat.

Every effort to release himself was fruitless; her strength seemed superhuman, and as far beyond him as was her stature. Her face glowered close down upon his now, still with the same fell expression.

"The only thing I could have done," went on Jack, in describing the scene to me—and just here he shall speak for himself—"the only means by which I might perhaps have made her relax her hold would have been by aiming one or two tremendous blows with my right fist (which was at liberty) at her face. Had it been a man's, there would have been no hesitation; had it been indeed that of an ordinary woman at such a pass, I should not have hesitated to strike her, to stun her, if I could by any means, but the face, that I seemed to know so well, yet so mysteriously, I could not raise my hand against it, and, as my arm swung up with the first impulse to deal her a blow, it fell helpless by my side. Vain were my efforts to get her hand away from my throat; there was a terrible swaying to and fro for a minute or two, I felt the grip of the long fingers tightening, and myself choking. Suddenly we fell, the whole carriage seemed to be falling—there was a fearful jerk or two, a strange upheaving of the floor, a tremendous rattle and crash—I appeared to be thrown headlong to some great distance, and—all was darkness!"

The termination of that deadly struggle was brought about in a manner as marvelous and as unlooked for as could well have been imagined.

Some fifty souls, say, were traveling in that train—all, save one, in apparent security. Jack's life alone was in danger, when, lo! by one of those marvelous coincidences which do happen at times in the supreme moments of existence, the rescue came, but at the cost of many a life, which but just before would have seemed worth treble price of Jack's.

At the very instant that his might have dependeed upon another tightening grip or two from the hand of a maniac, a frightful catastrophe occurred on the train. The tire of an engine wheel broke and a half dozen carriages were hurled down a steep embankment. The scene that succeeded is, unhappily, of too common occurrence to need more than a word of reference here. Seven passengers were killed outright and double that number slightly or badly hurt, the remainder escaping, as by a miracle, with nothing else than a severe shaking.

My friend was among the shakers. He had been thrown clear of the debris on to a soft, grassy spot, half bank, half hedge; emphatically his life was saved!

But what followed it was that which caused the suffering—that wrought the terrible change in Jack.

In the darkness of that soft autumn night he strove, foremost among those who had been spared, to render such help as was possible to the less fortunate. When official assistance came, and fires were set blazing to give light, almost the first care was to try and seek out his dangerous fellow traveler. In the confusion nobody was prepared, of course, to listen to Jack's account of her, even had he been prepared then to give it. She was not, evidently, moving about among the crowd; he assured himself of that; but supposing her, like himself, to have escaped injury (and he concluded that this was likely; might she not, with the stealth and cunning incident to her malady, be hiding, and be thus further eluding detection, become, with her homicidal mania, as dangerous to the community at large as some fierce, wild animal would be? The thought made him shudder, he must lose no time in assuring himself of her fate.

As soon as an approach to order could be evolved out of that awful chaos, he had convinced himself that she was not among the injured. Then he turned to the dead. His eyes fell upon several mutilated and motionless forms, which had been laid in an ominous row at the foot of one part of the embankment. Hers was not among them; he could find no trace of her.

At length as a sickly dawn was beginning to make the search easier, he endeavored to discover the spot where the carriage he had occupied had fallen, and to retrace his steps (quite to the rear of the train, by the way) to the place where he found himself lying after the catastrophe.

By this time he had made known briefly to some officials that a woman was missing who had not been in the carriage with him, and one or two of them followed him in his quest. Presently he realized pretty well where he had been thrown; he all but identified the spot. Then he scrambled through the hedge and there, on the opposite side, on a sloping bank of a ditch, he beheld, lying quite still, her dark, unmistakable form.

He ran forward, and bending over her and looking down upon her marble, upturned face, saw at a glance that there was nothing dangerous about her now—those terrible eyes were closed forever. Except or a slight wound on the temple whence a little blood had trickled, and the distorted, but now rigidly closed hand, which had been so lately at his throat, she looked as calm and uninjured as if she were merely sleeping, while death had restored for a brief period much of that beauty, the traces of which had struck him when her veil was first lifted.

One of the surgeons here came hurrying up, in answer to summons.

"Good heavens!" he exclaimed; "here she is, then, at last! Why, she must have been in the train. How on earth did she manage it?"

"Who is she? inquired Jack, earnestly, with a strange return of the old inexplicable sensation. "Who is she? You appear to know her. Pray tell me."

"Oh, one of our inmates; she got away yesterday morning; no one knows how;" was the answer.

"You are from Longmoor, then. How long has she been there? What is the name?"

"Oh, she has been there upwards of twenty years, I believe, long before my time."

"And her name?"

"Upon my word, at this moment, I can hardly," went on the doctor, mechanically passing his finger over one of the pulseless wrists before him, and with a calm hesitation which contrasted strongly with Jack's earnest, impetuous manner. "I can hardly remember, I think she was committed for the murder of her own little girl. It was a sad case, I know. Ah! her name: I have it," went on the doctor suddenly. "Her name was Pallent—Rachel Pallant."

Jack sprang from the kneeling posture in which he was as if he had been shot. Why, this was his own dead mother's name. But psbaw! what of that? Well it was a startling coincidence; that was all. Ah, but was it all? Indeed, no. Would that it were!

The inquest led to a revelation. That inquiry fully explained what had been the nature of the influence which the weird, pale face and strange presence had upon my friend.

The strong, but subtle, link, which no time or absence can quite sunder existing between mother and son, had made itself felt the instant those two sat face to face, for the unhappy woman was indeed no other than Jack's own mother.

He had never been told—in fact it had been carefully kept from him Why run the risk of clouding for life that bright and happy temperament? He was only four years old when the dreadful business happened. Hence he had scarcely known a mother's care; she was lost to him and to the world as completely as if she had died, Nay, death would have been a mercy by comparison, and it was generally assumed that she was dead; only a very few intimate friends knew the truth.

The poor lady's mind had given way suddenly after the birth of a child who did not live. Within a week the homicidal mania possessed her; by the merest chance she had been prevented from committing some frightful outrage upon her little boy, my poor friend Jack; and restraint not having been put upon her in time—for her malady had hardly been suspected, so unlooked for was its appearance—she consummated her deadly propensity upon her eldest child, a girl of fifteen years of age—killed her, in a word, as she lay asleep.

And here after, a lapse of twenty years, was the climax and end of the tragedy, as dreadful as anything that had gone before. The order for release, when it came, brought with it as much suffering (to all but one) as had the orher for captivity. No wonder Jack was an altered man. I have never seen a smile on his face since, though I trust that time, with its healing influence, may at least soften the blow.

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1	do	do	10,000
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5	do	2000	10,000
10	do	1000	10,000
20	do	500	10,000
100	do	200	20,000
300	do	100	30,000
500	do	50	25,000
1000	do	25	25,000

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